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ABSTRACT

Many educators believe the role of vocational education is to prepare students for work in a given trade or vocational area with the focus on job skill training. Some contend vocational education should concentrate more broadly on all aspects of students' career development, including lifelong learning, employability, and cognitive skills. One way to expand the focus of vocational education is through the integration of academic and vocational education. Some states, such as Ohio, have redesigned their vocational education curricula to address state skill standards that have been expanded to include the academic competencies and skill levels needed to enter a given occupation or occupational area. Interdisciplinary curricula are another form of academic/vocational integration that has gained interest across the country. A comprehensive educational program must show the correlation between learning to work and learning to think. Connecting content of knowledge with the context of application enables students to expand their ability to solve problems. Constructivism requires that teachers follow practices that lead students to engage in higher-order thinking. The concepts of career development offer an expanded focus for vocational education, one that extends to include transitional components such as academic skills, productive work habits, work values, and career decision-making skills. (Contains 11 references.) (YLB)

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Job Training versus Career Development: What Is Voc Ed's Role?

Should vocational education concentrate on preparing students for specific jobs or should it be more focused on broader career development, including lifelong learning, employability, and cognitive skills? This *Digest* explores these questions and examines how vocational education programs can best prepare students to meet the demands of the current and future workplace.

Job Training and Vocational Education

When asked to describe the role of vocational education in the schooling of the nation's youth, most educators (and citizens) would say it is to prepare students for work in a given trade or vocational area. For many years, this preparation has focused on job skill training, the philosophy being that training individuals in the "hands-on" tasks required for work is of primary importance in ensuring their employability and job market success. This singular attention to job-specific skills continues to characterize many vocational education programs. The controversy among educators is whether or not students are actually acquiring the appropriate job-specific skills and whether or not those skills are sufficient for the comprehensive education of youth.

In an effort to document the learning gains for students in secondary and adult full-time vocational programs, states are developing skill standards for given occupations upon which their vocational curricula are based. These standards form the basis for assessing students' entry-level occupational skills plus the employability skills that are generic to all occupations. The documentation of these skills then provides vocational program completers with credentials (or a career passport) to present to potential employers, thus enhancing their ability to gain employment. The advocates of generic work skills (educators and employers alike) maintain that workers who have them will be able to move successfully from one job to another as demanded by the changing competitive market. However, the question about the effectiveness of these approaches as the 21st century approaches is strongly debated.

The nature of today's workplace is different from that of the past. It is characterized by global competition, cultural diversity, new technologies, and new management processes that require workers to have critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills as well as advanced levels of job skills. Some educators believe that this new and emerging workplace eliminates the viability of vocational education programs that concentrate solely on the acquisition of job skills. They contend that vocational education should concentrate more broadly on all aspects of their students' career development—that it should expand its focus by initiating programs that prepare students with the "basic academic skills, the teachability and flexibility, the commitment to lifelong learning that permits them to rapidly change in ways required by new organizations of work or content changes in the processes and performances of work" (Herr 1995, p. 5).

Kincheloe (1995) criticizes vocational education's focus on specific job skills. Contending that "most observers agree that vocational education is indeed a failure," he notes that "very few vocational students find work immediately after high school that is related to their vocational education" (p. 31). "Some studies report that high school vocational graduates are no more likely to find jobs than are high school dropouts" (ibid.) Another criticism of vocational education's focus on job-specific training is that it tends to filter the working class and poor students into its programs, thus neglecting the broader career development perspective that this vulnerable population needs to compete in the global workplace. Additionally, as "mainstream society refuses to value the knowledge of job preparation, the status of work-related knowledge is low" (ibid., p. 32).

An Alternative to Job-Specific Training

One way of expanding the focus of vocational education is through the integration of academic and vocational education. The increasing importance of the integration of academic and vocational education in preparing youth and adults for the workplace of 2000 is described by Herr (1995):

> As large numbers of low-skilled or semiskilled jobs are exported to other nations or eliminated by the rapid application of advanced technology, automated machine systems, and robotics in the workplace, there is a redistribution of learning requirements in the United States and in other nations that receive manufacturing and service jobs formerly done in the United States. This redistribution of learning requirements begins with an emphasis on the importance of basic academic skills as the foundation for being able to learn and to perform the tasks expected in the emerging occupations as well as in many of the traditional occupations. (p. 20)

Through integrated academic and vocational programs, students have the opportunity to learn the basic academic skills in relationship to the broad job skills required in the workplace. And, since the average worker changes occupations four to six times in a lifetime, a broad range of academic and vocational skills that include higher-order thinking skills is imperative to workplace success (Rosenstock 1991). Parnell (1996) proposes "combining an information-rich subject-matter content with an experience-rich context of application" (p. 19). In this way, each discipline reinforces and builds upon the other (Cahill 1993).

Some states, like Ohio, have redesigned their vocational education curricula to address state skill standards for given occupational areas, providing students with strong experience in and understanding of all aspects of the industry in which they are preparing to enter. Ohio's Occupational Competency Analysis Profiles (OCAPs) expand the list of occupational and employability skills (or competencies) to include the academic competencies and ACT Work Keys assessment skill levels needed to enter a given occupation or occupational area. These OCAPs afford vocational and applied academic teachers the opportunity to formulate their curricula using the validated list of all competencies required in the field (Vocational Instructional Materials Laboratory 1995).

Interdisciplinary curricula are another form of academic/vocational integration that has gained interest across the country. In interdisciplinary curricula, active linkages can be designed between multiple fields of knowledge, enabling students to make connections between subjects, thus making the curriculum more relevant to them. Integrated curricula can lead students to explore a number of different subject areas and allow them to "see the strength of each discipline's perspective in a connected way" (Jacobs 1989, p. 5). In stating "we cannot train people in specializations and expect them to cope with the multifaceted nature of their work," Jacobs presents another support for the integration of academic and vocational education (ibid., p. 6).

Connected and Constructivist Learning

"When political leaders have discussed job training and the relationship between schooling and work, they rarely ask what type of citizens do we want to produce or what kind of society do we want to build" (Kincheloe 1995, p. 24). These questions suggest that a comprehensive educational program must show the correlation between learning to work and learning to think. "Unless connections are made between subject content and the context of application, little long-lasting learning occurs for the majority of students" (Parnell 1996, p. 19). Connecting content of knowledge with the context of application enables students to expand the "ability of the thinking brain to solve problems, and to assimilate that knowledge in a way that can be useful in new situations" (ibid., p. 20).

Parnell contends that the greatest sin committed in many schools today is the failure to help students "use the magnificent power of the brain to make the connections between knowing and doing, academic and vocational education, knowledge and application of knowledge, one subject-matter discipline and another, and subject-matter content and the context of use" (p. 18). "Rather than helping students develop an ability to memorize facts in a textbook, teachers should teach students metacognitive and self-evaluative skills so they can assess what they need to learn in order to solve a problem or complete a project" (ASCD 1995b, p. 5).

The constructivist approach to teaching and learning requires that teachers "provide a learning environment where students search for meaning, appreciate uncertainty, and inquire responsibly" (Brooks and Brooks 1993, p. v). "We must begin to make a difference in how students learn by encouraging student-to-student interaction, initiating lessons that foster cooperative learning, and providing opportunities for students to be exposed to interdisciplinary curriculum . . . we must abandon the mimetic approach to learning and implement practices that encourage students to think and rethink, demonstrate, and exhibit" (ibid., p. v). Under constructivism, teachers follow practices that lead students to engage in higher-order thinking and provide opportunities for students to process information through various avenues of expression—written, oral, building, drawing, etc.

Career Development and Vocational Education

The concepts of career development offer an expanded focus for vocational education, one that extends beyond the limits of job training. Proponents of career development contend that vocational education should supplement its programs with transitional components such as academic skills, productive work habits, work values, and career decision-making skills (Hoyt 1993). It should initiate connected and constructivist ways for students to think and learn as important aspects of career development and appreciate the contribution they make to students' development of career interests, choice, planning, and performance.

Successful career development in vocational education requires educators who are willing to take risks, to forego the need for "control," and to allow students to pursue their own learning—to ask their own questions and seek their own answers. They must invite students "to search for understanding, appreciate uncertainty, and inquire responsibly" (Brooks and Brooks 1993, p. 6), while accepting the uncertainty themselves as students pursue areas that are new to them as well. Teachers in newly designed vocational programs should "provide opportunities for students to make connections with their own life experiences" (ASCD 1995a, p. 1). Rather than helping students to memorize facts, "teachers should teach students metacognitive and self-evaluative skills so they can assess what they need to learn in order to solve a problem or complete a project. Students who learn these skills will be able to direct their own learning—to recognize what skills they need and to go off and learn their skills on their own" (ASCD 1995b, p. 4). Then, they will be able to involve themselves in lifelong learning that continually prepares them for employment and career development.

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